

# THE THREEPENNY REVIEW

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My Favorite Book

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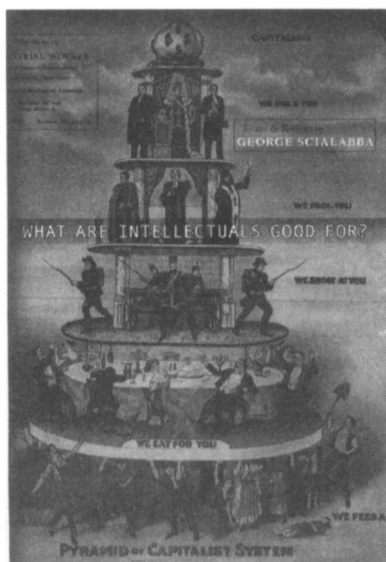


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## WHAT ARE INTELLECTUALS GOOD FOR?

Essays & Reviews by  
GEORGE SCIALABBA



Foreword by Scott McLemee

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Men Inside a Café, Murfreesboro, Tennessee, 1935

### BOOKS

## My Favorite Book

Javier Marías

ASKING A WRITER to choose his favorite book is tempting him either to lie or to boast, since, if he's really honest (not that there's any reason why he should be, either then or on any other occasion), he would be sure to say that his favorite book is one that he himself has written. It isn't the case, as the late, boastful Juan Rulfo said about his novel *Pedro Páramo*, that all writers write the book they would like to read, because otherwise there would be nothing worth reading, but it is true that an author's own books are the ones he will have read most often and with most care, patience, interest, understanding, and indulgence (sometimes as if his very life depended on it). They will also be the books—one presumes—that most satisfy him, and if they're not, then he should refrain from publishing them. Writing is, in short, the most perfect and passionate way of reading, which is doubtless

why adolescents, who usually have more time on their hands, often take the trouble to write out a poem they really love: rewriting is not only a way of appropriating a text, of adopting and endorsing it, it's also the best, most exact, most alert, most certain way of reading it. The Borges character, Pierre Menard, set out to write *Don Quixote* and, before he died, managed to complete two whole chapters and a fragment by his own means (that is, not by copying or transcribing it or even trying to live the same life Cervantes lived in order to find out if it was those experiences that had led him to write the book). His work, therefore, remained unfinished—a very painful and frustrating experience for any writer—even though, in his case, Menard could, had he so wished, easily have found out what the rest of his novel would have been like. Of course, being a writer rather than a mere reader, he did not.

I, however, am fortunate enough to be able to reply to the question without indulging in lies or even in excessive vainglory because I translated Laurence Sterne's *Tristram Shandy* (or *The Life and Opinions of Tristram Shandy, Gentleman*, to give it its full title), and so, as well as reading it, I have also written it. It probably is and will be my best book, and I say "probably" thinking of other translations I've made (*The Mirror of the Sea* by Conrad or the works of Sir Thomas Browne) or others I might one day consider undertaking (Eliot's *Prufrock* or Faulkner's *The Wild Palms*).

Now, when I say that *Tristram Shandy* is my favorite book, I realize that this is precisely because I did translate it, because each and every one of its sentences, every word (even the blank and, indeed, the black pages it contains) not only passed before my attentive gaze, but through my painstaking intellect, my vigilant ear, my own tongue (by which I mean Spanish, not the moist thing in my mouth), and was finally reordered and set down on paper by my weary, hard-working fingers. Had I not translated *Tristram Shandy*, my favorite book might be *Don Quixote* or *Madame Bovary* or *Heart of Darkness* or *Adolphe* or the poetry of Baudelaire. However, I didn't spend almost two years of my life with any of those books; nor did I submerge myself in them as I did in *Tristram Shandy*, however carefully I may have read them (and I did have to read *Don Quixote* in order to teach it,



which is another of the most perfect ways of reading a book, but not the most exciting; none of them obliged me to write or edit or compose over a thousand sheets of paper, each one typed and retyped numerous times; none demanded that I find or invent more than a thousand notes; none of them, lastly, took over my prose, put me inside the author's—the other's—skin, so that I thought like him, spoke like him, said what he said in the way that he said it. Consequently, I can announce the title of my favorite book without resorting to lies. And yet, even though the truth does not impel me (as it would most writers) to choose one of my own novels, such absolute sincerity does not entirely exempt me from a charge of boastfulness.

For I should in all honesty say that my favorite book is my *Tristram Shandy*, that is, *Tristram Shandy* in or according to my version, which is necessarily different from Sterne's (although it's also necessarily the same, which is one of the insoluble paradoxes of translation, of all translation, good or bad), just as the two chapters of *Don Quixote* that Pierre Menard managed to write must have been different from those by Cervantes even though they were exactly the same, word for word, and written in the same language. This doesn't mean that I consider my version of Sterne's novel to be superior to Sterne's original—no, I mean something much simpler and less competitive: in my version, in Sterne-according-to-Mariás, I know the reasoning behind the choice of each line and each word, whereas I don't in Sterne-according-to-Sterne. And that is why I could still go on correcting my version, could keep working on it, improving it in accordance with my current criteria, aptitudes, and understanding (the translation

was, after all, published in 1978), something that I couldn't and wouldn't want to do with the English text, which, unlike the Spanish, does not in any way belong to me.

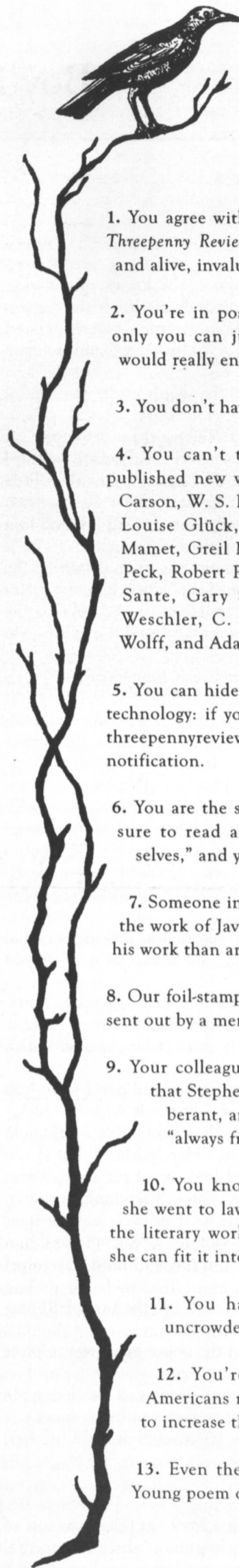
There's another circumstance to be added to all this, one that apparently contradicts what I've just said and yet which is crucial in making my choice. The further beyond my grasp a book is, the greater my admiration. There are books I wouldn't want to write and wouldn't like to have written and which I nonetheless admire, precisely because, quite apart from not wanting to have written them, I feel I would have been incapable of doing so. Of all the books I've written or translated, and which I know, therefore, that in one sense or another I was capable of writing or translating, *Tristram Shandy* is the only book I would consider myself incapable of writing or translating now, even though I know that I *did* translate it. I mean if, say, just for the pleasure of reading a page or two, I open it at random and start to read (to re-read my own version), I find myself confronted by a task that now seems to me utterly impossible. I cannot conceive of how anyone could translate or have translated each and every page of this book into Spanish in an acceptable manner, and I can't explain how the person I was did just that. I don't believe the person I am now would be capable of the task. My favorite book, then, contains all the necessary qualities to be my favorite: it is, at once, the classic novel closest to *Don Quixote* and to the novel of my own age; thinking about it and occasionally dipping into it always bring me pleasure; and, finally, I admire it immensely because I see it as something beyond my grasp, even though I know that, as well as reading it (which, fortunately, I will always be able to do), there was a time when I re-wrote it. □

(Translated from the Spanish by Margaret Jull Costa)



Main and Court Streets, Circleville, Ohio, 1938

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